WHISPERING SMITH

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDRE BOWLES

SYNOPSIS.

Murray Sinclair and his gang of wreckers were called out to clear the railroad tracks at Smoky Creek. McCloud, a young road superintendent, caught Sinclair and his men in the act of looting the wrecked train. Sinclair pleaded innocence, declaring it only amounted to a small sum—a treat for the men. McCloud discharged the whole outfit and ordered the wreckage burned. McCloud became acquainted with Dicksie Dunning, a girl of the west, who came to look at the wreck. She gave him a message for Sinclair. "Whispering" Gordon Smith told President Bucks of the railroad, of McCloud's brave fight against a gang of crazed miners and that was the reason for the superintendent's appointment to his high office. McCloud arranged to board at the boarding house of Mrs. Sinclair, the ex-foreman's deserted wife.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

Betty came with only her colored maid, old Puss Dunning, who had taken her from the nurse's arms when she was born and taken care of her ever since. The two—the tall Kentucky girl and the bent mammy—arrived at the Stone ranch one day in June, and Richard, done then with bridges and looking after his ranch interests, had already fallen violently in love with Betty. She was delicate, but, if those in Medicine Bend who remembered her said true, a lovely creature. Remaining in the mountains was the last thing Betty had ever thought of, but no one, man or woman, could withstand Dick Dunning. She fell quite in love with him the first time she set eyes on him in Medicine Bend, for he was very handsome in the saddle, and Betty was fairly wild about horses. So Dick Dunning wooed a fond mistress and married her and buried her, and all within hardly more than a year.

But in that year they were very happy; never two happier, and when she slept away her suffering she left him, as a legacy, a tiny baby girl. Puss brought the mite of a creature in its swaddling clothes to the sick mother—very, very sick then—and poor Betty turned her dark eyes on it, kissed it, looked at her husband and whispered "Dicksie," and died. Dicksie had been Betty's pet name for her mountain lover, so the father said the child's name should be Dicksie and nothing else; and his heart broke and soon he died. Nothing else, storm or flood, death or disaster, had ever moved Dick Dunning; then a single blow killed him. He rode once in a while over the ranch, a great tract by that time of 20,000 acres, all in one body, all under fence, up and down both sides of the big river, in part irrigated, swarming with cattle—none of it stirred Dick! and with little Dicksie in his arms he slept away his suffering.

So Dicksie was left, as her mother had been, to Puss, while Lance looked after the ranch, swore at the price of cattle, and played cards at Medicine Bend. At ten, Dicksie, as thoroughly spoiled as a pet baby could be by a fool mammy, a fond cousin, and a galaxy of devoted cowboys, was sent, in spite of crying and flinging, to a far-away convent—her father had planned everything—where in many tears she learned that there were other things in the world besides cattle and mountains and sunshine and tall, broad-hatted horsemen to swing from their stirrups and pick her hat from the ground—just to see little Dicksie laugh—when they swooped past the house to the corrals. When she came back from Kentucky, her grandmother dead and her schooldays finished, all the land she could see in the valley was hers.

CHAPTER VI.

In Marion's Shop.

In Boney street, Medicine Bend, stands an early-day row of one-story buildings; they once made up a prosperous block, which has long since fallen into the decay of paintless days. There is in Boney street a livery stable, a second-hand store, a laundry, a bakery, a moribund grocery and a bicycle shop, and at the time of this story there was also Marion Sinclair's millinery shop; but the better class of Medicine Bend business, such as the gambling houses, saloons, pawnshops, restaurants, barber shops, and those sensitive, clean-shaven, and alert establishments known as "gents' stores," had deserted Boney street for many years. Bats fly in the dark of Boney street while Front street at the same hour is a blaze of electricity and frontier hilarity. The millinery store stood next to the corner of Fort street. The lot lay in an "L," and at the rear of the store the first owner had built a small connecting cottage to live in. This faced on Fort street, so that Marion had her shop and living rooms communicating, and yet apart. The store building is still pointed out as the former shop of Marion Sinclair, where George McCloud boarded when the Crawling Stone line was built, where Whispering Smith might often have been seen, where Sinclair himself was last seen alive in Medicine Bend, where Dicksie Dunning's horse dragged her senseless one wild mountain night, and where, indeed, for a time, the affairs of the whole mountain division seemed to tangle in very hard knots.

In her dining room, which connected through a curtained door with the shop, McCloud sat one day alone eating his dinner. Marion was in front serving a customer. McCloud heard voices in the shop, but gave no heed till a man walked through the curtained doorway and he saw Murray Sinclair standing before him. A stormy interview with Callahan and Blood at the Wickiup had taken place just a week before, and McCloud after what Sinclair had then threatened, though not prepared, felt as he saw him that anything might occur. McCloud being in possession of the little room, however, the initiative fell on Sinclair, who, looking his best, snatched his hat from his head and bowed ironically. "My mistake," he said blandly.

"Come right in," returned McCloud, not knowing whether Marion had a possible hand in her husband's unexpected appearance. "Do you want to see me?"

"I don't," smiled Sinclair; "and to be perfectly frank," he added with studied consideration, "I wish to God I never had seen you. Well—you've thrown me, McCloud."

"You've thrown yourself, haven't you, Murray?"

"From your point of view, of course. But, McCloud, this is a small country for two points of view. Do you want to get out of it, or do you want me to?"

"The country suits me, Sinclair."

"No man that has ever played me dirt can stay here while I stay." Sinclair, with a hand on the portiere, was moving from the doorway into the room. McCloud in a leisurely way rose, though with a slightly flushed face, and at that juncture Marion ran into the room and spoke abruptly. "Here is the silk, Mr. Sinclair," she exclaimed, handing to him a package she had not finished wrapping. "I meant you to wait in the other room."

"It was an accidental intrusion," returned Sinclair, maintaining his irony. "I have apologized, and Mr. McCloud and I understand one another better than ever."

"Please say to Miss Dunning," continued Marion, nervous and insistent, "that the band for her riding-hat hasn't come yet, but it should be here to-morrow."

As she spoke McCloud leaned across the table, resolved to take advantage of the opening, if it cost him his life. "And by the way, Mr. Sinclair, Miss Dunning wished me to say to you that the lovely bay colt you sent her had sprung his shoulder badly, the hind shoulder, I think, but they are doing everything possible for it and they think it will make a great horse."

Sinclair's snort at the information was a marvel of indecision. Was he being made fun of? Should he draw and end it? But Marion faced him resolutely as he stood, and talking in the most business like way she backed him out of the room and to the shop door. Balked of his opportunity, he retreated stubbornly but with the utmost politeness, and left with a grin, lashing his tail, so to speak.

Coming back, Marion tried to hide her uneasiness under even tones to McCloud. "I'm sorry he disturbed you. I was attending to a customer and had to ask him to wait a moment."

"Don't apologize for having a customer."

"He lives over beyond the Stone ranch, you know, and is taking some things out for the Dunnings to-day. He likes an excuse to come in here because it annoys me. Finish your dinner, Mr. McCloud."

"Thank you, I'm done."

"But you haven't eaten anything. Isn't your steak right?"

"It's fine, but that man—well, you know how I like him and how he likes me. I'll content myself with digesting my temper."

"Here is the Silk, Mr. Sinclair."

CHAPTER VII.

Smoky Creek Bridge.

It was not alone that a defiance makes a bad dinner sauce; there was more than this for McCloud to feed on. He was forced to confess to himself as he walked back to the Wickiup that the most annoying feature of the incident was the least important, namely, that his only enemy in the country should be intrusted with commissions from the Stone ranch and be carrying packages for Dicksie Dunning. It was Sinclair's trick to do things for people, and to make himself so useful that they must like first his obligingness and afterward himself. Sinclair, McCloud knew, was close in many ways to Lance Dunning. It was said to have been his influence that won Dunning's consent to sell a right of way across the ranch for the new Crawling Stone line. But McCloud felt it useless to disguise the fact to himself that he now had a second keen interest in the Crawling Stone country—not alone a dream of a line, but a dream of a girl. Sitting moodily in his office, with his feet on the desk, a few nights after his encounter with Sinclair, he recalled her nod as she said good-by. It had seemed the least bit encouraging, and he meditated anew on the only 20 minutes of real pleasurable excitement he had ever felt in his life, the 20 minutes with Dicksie Dunning at Smoky creek. Her intimates, he had heard, called her Dicksie, and he was vaguely envying her intimates when the night dispatcher, Rooney Lee, opened the door and disturbed his reflections.

"How is Number One, Rooney?" called McCloud, as if nothing but the thought of a train movement ever entered his head.

Rooney Lee paused. In his hand he held a message, and he faced McCloud with evident uneasiness. "Holy smoke, Mr. McCloud, here's a ripper! We've lost Smoky Creek bridge."

"Lost Smoky Creek bridge?" echoed McCloud, rising in amazement.

"Burned to-night. Seventy-seven was flagged by the man at the pump station."

"That's a tie-up for your life!" exclaimed McCloud, reaching for the message. "How could it catch fire? Is it burned up?"

"I can't get anything on that yet; this came from Canby. I'll have a good wire in a few minutes and get it all for you."

"Have Phil Halley and Hyde notified, Rooney, and Reed and Brill Young, and get up a train. Smoky Creek bridge! By heavens, we are ripped up the back now! What can we do there, Rooney?" He was talking to himself. "There isn't a thing for it on God's earth but switchbacks and five-per-cent. grades down to the bottom of the creek and cribbing across it till the new line is ready. Wire Callahan and Morris Blood, and get everything you can for me before we start."

Ten hours later and many hundreds of miles from the mountain division, President Bucks and a companion were riding in the peace of a June morning down the beautiful Mohawk valley with an earlier and illustrious railroad man, William C. Brown. The three men were at breakfast in Brown's car. A message was brought in for Bucks. He read it and passed it to his companion, Whispering Smith, who sat at Brown's left hand. The message was from Callahan with the news of the burning of Smoky Creek bridge. Details were few, because no one on the west end could suggest a plausible cause for the fire.

"What do you think of it, Gordon?" demanded Bucks, bluntly.

Whispering Smith seemed at all times bordering on good-natured surprise, and in that normal condition he read Callahan's message.

He was laughing under Bucks' scrutiny when he handed the message back. "Why, I don't know a thing about it, not a thing; but taking a long shot and speaking by and far, I should say it looks something like first blood for Sinclair," he suggested, and to change the subject lifted his cup of coffee.

"Then it looks like you for the mountains to-night instead of for Weber and Fields'," retorted Bucks, reaching for a cigar. "Brown, why have you never learned to smoke?"

CHAPTER VIII.

The Misunderstanding.

No attempt was made to minimize the truth that the blow to the division was a staggering one. The loss of Smoky creek bridge put almost 1,000 miles of the mountain division out of business. Perishable freight and time freight were diverted to other lines. Passengers were transferred; lunches were served to them in the deep valley, and they were supplied by an ingenuous advertising department with pictures of the historic bridge as it had long stood, and their addresses were taken with the promise of a picture of the ruins. The engineering department and the operating department united in a tremendous effort to bring about a resumption of traffic. Glover's men, pulled off construction, were sent forward in trainloads. Dancing's linemen strung arc lights along the creek until the canyon twinkled at night like a mountain village, and men in three shifts worked elbow to elbow unceasingly to run the switchbacks down to the creek bed. There, by cribbing across the bottom, they got in a temporary line.

McCloud spent his days at the creek and his nights at Medicine Bend with his assistant and his chief dispatcher, advising, counseling, studying out trouble reports, and steadying wherever he could the weakened lines of his operating forces. He was getting his first taste of the trials of the hardest worked and poorest paid man in the operating department of a railroad—the division superintendent.

To these were added personal annoyances. A trainload of Duck Bar steers, shipped by Lance Dunning from the Crawling Stone ranch, had been caught west of the bridge the very night of the fire. They had been loaded at Tipton and shipped to catch a good market, and under extravagant promises from the livestock agent of a quick run to Chicago. When Lance Dunning learned that his cattle had been caught west of the break and would have to be unloaded, he swore up a horse in hot haste and started for Medicine Bend. McCloud, who had not closed his eyes for 60 hours, had just got into Medicine Bend from Smoky Creek and was sitting at his desk buried in a mass of papers, but he ordered the cattleman admitted. He was, in fact, eager to meet the manager of the big ranch and the cousin of Dicksie. Lance Dunning stood above six feet in height, and was a handsome man, in spite of the hard lines around his eyes, as he walked in; but neither his manner nor his expression was amiable.

"Are you Mr. McCloud? I've been here three times this afternoon to see you," said he, ignoring McCloud's answer and a proffered chair. "This is your office, isn't it?"

McCloud, a little surprised, answered again and civilly: "It certainly is; but I have been at Smoky Creek for two or three days."

"What have you done with my cattle?"

"The Duck Bar train was run back to Point of Rocks and the cattle were unloaded at the yard."

Lance Dunning spoke with increasing harshness: "By whose order was that done? Why wasn't I notified? Have they had feed or water?"

"All the stock caught west of the bridge was sent back for feed and water by my orders. It has all been taken care of. You should have been notified, certainly; it is the business of the stock agent to see to that. Let me inquire about it while you are here, Mr. Dunning," suggested McCloud, ringing for his clerk.

Dunning lost no time in expressing himself. "I don't want my cattle held at Point of Rocks!" he said, angrily. "Your Point of Rocks yards are infected. My cattle shouldn't have been sent there."

"Oh, no! The old yards where they had a touch of fever were burned off the face of the earth a year ago. The new yards are perfectly sanitary. The loss of the bridge has crippled us, you know. Your cattle are being well cared for, Mr. Dunning, and if you doubt it you may go up and give our men any orders you like in the matter at our expense."

"You're taking altogether too much on yourself when you run my stock over the country in this way," exclaimed Dunning, refusing to be placated. "How am I to get to Point of Rocks—walk there?"

"Not at all," returned McCloud, ringing up his clerk and asking for a pass, which was brought back in a moment and handed to Dunning. "The cattle," continued McCloud, "can be run down, unloaded, and driven around the break to-morrow—with the loss of only two days."

"And in the meantime I lose my market."

"It is too bad, certainly, but I suppose it will be several days before we can get a line across Smoky creek."

"Why weren't the cattle sent through that way yesterday? What have they been held at Point of Rocks for? I call the thing badly managed."

"We couldn't get the empty cars up from Piedmont for the transfer until to-day; empties are very scarce everywhere now."

"There always have been empties here when they were wanted until lately. There's been no head or tail to anything on this division for six months."

"I'm sorry that you have that impression."

"That impression is very general," declared the stockman, with an oath, "and if you keep on discharging the only men on this division that are competent to handle a break like this, it is likely to continue!"

"Just a moment!" McCloud's finger rose pointedly. "My failure to please you in caring for your stock in an emergency may be properly a matter for comment; your opinion as to the way I am running this division is, of course, your own; but don't attempt to criticise the retention or discharge of any man on my pay roll!"

Dunning strode toward him. "I'm a shipper on this line; when it suits me to criticise you or your methods, or anybody else's, I expect to do so," he retorted in high tones.

"But you cannot tell me how to run my business!" thundered McCloud, leaning over the table in front of him.

As the two men glared at each other Rooney Lee opened the door. His surprise at the situation amounted to consternation. He shuffled to the corner of the room, and while McCloud and Dunning engaged hotly again, Rooney, from the corner, threw a shot of his own into the quarrel. "On time!" he roared.

The angry men turned. "What's on time?" asked McCloud, curtly.

"Number One; she's in and changing engines. I told them you were going west," declared Rooney in so deep tones that his fiction would never have been suspected.

Dunning, to emphasize, without a further word, his disgust for the situation and his contempt for the management, tore into scraps the pass that had been given him, threw the scraps on the floor, took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it: insolence could do no more.

McCloud looked over at the dispatcher. "No, I am not going west, Rooney. But if you will be good enough to stay here and find out from this man just how this railroad ought to be run, I will go to bed. He can tell you; the microbe seems to be working in his mind right now," said McCloud, slamming down the roll-top of his desk. And with Lance Dunning glaring at him, somewhat speechless, he put on his hat and walked out of the room.

It was but one of many disagreeable incidents due to the loss of the bridge. Complications arising from the tie-up followed him at every turn. It seemed as if he could not get away from trouble following trouble. After 40 hours further of toil, relieved by four hours of sleep, McCloud found himself, rather dead than alive, back at Medicine Bend and in the little dining room at Marion's. Coming in at the cottage door on Fort street, he dropped into a chair. The cottage rooms were empty. He heard Marion's voice in the front shop; she was engaged with a customer. Putting his head on the table to wait a moment, nature asserted itself and McCloud fell asleep. He woke hearing a voice that he had heard in dreams. Perhaps no other voice could have wakened him, for he slept for a few minutes a death-like sleep. At all events, Dicksie Dunning was in the front room and McCloud heard her. She was talking with Marion about the burning of Smoky Creek bridge.

"Every one is talking about it yet," Dicksie was saying. "If I had lost my best friend I couldn't have felt worse; you know, my father built it. I rode over there the day of the fire, and down into the creek, so I could look up where it stood. I never realized before how high and how long it was; and when I remembered how proud father always was of his work there—Cousin Lance has often told me—I sat down right on the ground and cried. How times have changed in railroading, haven't they? Mr. Sinclair was over just the other night, and he said if they kept using this new coal in the engines they would burn up everything on the division. Do you know, I have been waiting in town three or four hours now for Cousin Lance? I feel almost like a tramp. He is coming from the west with the stock train. It was due here hours ago, but they never seem to know when anything is to get here the way things are run on the railroad now. I want to give Cousin Lance some mail before he goes through."

"The passenger trains crossed the creek over the switchbacks hours ago, and they say the emergency grades are first-rate," said Marion Sinclair, on the defensive. "The stock trains must have followed right along. Your cousin is sure to be here pretty soon. Probably Mr. McCloud will know which train he is on, and Mr. Lee telephoned that Mr. McCloud would be over here at three o'clock for his dinner. He ought to be here now."

"Oh, dear, then I must go!"

"But he can probably tell you just when your cousin will be in."

"I wouldn't meet him for worlds!"

"You wouldn't? Why, Mr. McCloud is delightful."

"Oh, not for worlds, Marion! You know he is discharging all the best of the older men, the men that have made the road everything it is, and of course we can't help sympathizing with them over our way. For my part, I think it is terrible, after a man has given all of his life to building up a railroad, that he should be thrown out to starve in that way by new managers, Marion."

McCloud felt himself shrinking within his weary clothes. Resentment seemed to have died. He felt too exhausted to undertake controversy, even if it were to be thought of, and it was not.

"Oh, Mr. McCloud, Is It You?"

Nothing further was needed to complete his humiliation. He picked up his hat and with the thought of getting out as quietly as he had come in. In rising he swept a tumbler at his elbow from the table. The glass broke on the floor, and Marion exclaimed: "What is that?" and started for the dining room.

It was too late to get away. McCloud stepped to the portieres of the trimming room door and pushed them aside. Marion stood with a hat in her hand, and Dicksie, sitting at the table, was looking directly at the intruder as he appeared in the doorway. She saw in him her pleasant acquaintance of the wreck at Smoky Creek, whose name she had not learned. In her surprise, she rose to her feet, and Marion spoke quickly: "Oh, Mr. McCloud, is it you? I did not hear you come in."

Dicksie's face, which had lighted, became a spectacle of confusion after she heard the name. McCloud, conscious of the awkwardness of his position and the disorder of his garb, said the worst thing at once: "I fear I am inadvertently overhearing your conversation."

He looked at Dicksie as he spoke, chiefly because he could not help it, and this made matters hopeless.

She flushed more deeply. "I can not conceive why our conversation should invite a listener."

Her words did not, of course, help to steady him. "I tried to get away," he stammered, "when I realized I was a part of it."

"In any event," she exclaimed, hastily, "if you are Mr. McCloud I think it unpardonable to do anything like that!"

"I am Mr. McCloud, though I should rather be anybody else; and I am sorry that I was unable to help hearing what was said: I—"

"Marion, will you be kind enough to give me my gloves?" said Dicksie, holding out her hand.

Marion, having tried once or twice to intervene, stood between the firing-lines in helpless amazement. Her exclamations were lost; the two before her gave no heed to ordinary intervention.

McCloud flushed at being cut off, but he bowed. "Of course," he said, "if you will listen to no explanation I can only withdraw."

He went back, dinnerless, to work all night; but the switchbacks were doing capitally, and all night long trains were rolling through Medicine Bend from the west in an endless string. In the morning the yard was nearly cleared of west-bound tonnage. Moreover, the mail in the morning brought compensation. A letter came from Glover telling him not to worry himself to death over the tie-up, and one came from Bucks telling him to make ready for the building of the Crawling Stone line.

McCloud told Rooney Lee that if anybody asked for him to report him dead, and going to bed slept 24 hours.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)